

On the Firing Line (Thirty Seventh in a series)

Self Talk

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**“Winners say what they want to happen,
Losers say what they fear might happen.”**

The inner dialogue we carry on has a profound effect on our performance and even upon our mental health. Most people are not aware of their self-talk or, even if aware, do not understand its importance. Moreover, self-talk can be modified to achieve desired ends. This is especially important in the case of negative self-talk.

This article and the previous installment of the series explore the concepts of confidence and self-talk. Both articles are based on work by Dr. Nate Zinsser (Zinsser 2006), and provide, of necessity, only a short synopsis of each topic. Dr. Zinsser is Director of the Performance Enhancement Program, a cornerstone of the Center for Enhanced Performance at the United States Military Academy, in West Point, NY.

“The key to cognitive control is self-talk.”

“Self-talk becomes an asset when it enhances self-worth and performance. Such talk can help the athlete stay appropriately focused in the present, not dwelling on past mistakes or projecting too far into the future.”

“Self-talk becomes a liability when it is negative, distracting to the task at hand, or so frequent that it disrupts the automatic performance of skills.

How important is self-talk? At least one researcher (Seligman 1991) describes depression as nothing more than a disorder of conscious thought (negative self-talk), and not an issue of anger turned inward or brain chemistry imbalances, as maintained by some theories. In effect, the negative self-talk is the disease! In these cases, changing the self-talk from negative to positive eventually resolves the depression. Whether or not this is the only correct theory of depression, and there are likely others, changing self-talk from negative to positive has a dramatic positive effect on athletic performance.

We will confine the rest of this article to a discussion of self-talk for enhancing sport performance.

Uses of Self-Talk

“The uses of self-talk are almost as varied as are the different types of sports. The effective coach and sport psychologist can use self-talk to aid athletes in learning skills, correcting bad habits, preparing for performance, focusing attention, creating the best mood for performance, and building confidence and competence.”

Applications of self-talk include the following.

Skill Acquisition and Performance – As an athlete learns a skill, positive self-talk aids in the process by reminding the athlete of key steps in the process. Cue words are especially helpful. (“Smooth trigger.”) As the athlete masters the skill, self-talk should evolve to being far less frequent and shifts from mechanics to strategies and optimal feelings required to perform well. (“Relax and release.”)

Changing Bad Habits – Unlearning and reprogramming is facilitated by self-talk that focuses on the desired behavior or actions. (“Pressure on trigger. Decisive release.”) Focus and self-talk that reinforces the old or incorrect action only serves to reinforce rather than erase. (“Don’t jerk!”)

Attention Control – Keeping one’s focus on the task at hand – in the present moment – is critical to success. Self-talk that reminds the athlete what they need to do right now is a powerful technique for maintaining or altering attention. (“Head down, smooth!”)

Creating Affect or Mood – Use of words such as “smooth” or “relax” help an athlete perform in a desired manner or create feelings or a mood that allows them to perform well.

Changing Affect or Mood – Cue words are effective triggers for mood or energy level changes. Words such as “attack” or “easy” are but two examples that aid in altering the athlete’s arousal level and mood.

Controlling Effort – An athlete’s effort does not always match the optimal level at a given moment in competition. Phrases such as “go for it”, “rhythm and pace”, “cool it”, and other similar phrases aid the athlete in altering their effort to match the situation.

Building Self-Efficacy – Remember that self-efficacy is a belief in one’s specific abilities to perform an activity or meet a challenge. Self-talk has a powerful effect on an athlete’s own belief in their ability to accomplish a goal, meet a challenge, or recover from an injury.

Increasing Adoption and Maintenance of Exercise Behavior – Though more research is needed, it is thought by many that self-talk has an impact on the likelihood of an athlete beginning and adhering to a physical training regimen.

Identifying Self-Talk

“The first step in managing self-talk is becoming aware of what you say to yourself.”

Self-defeating “chatter” only leads to poor performance. Positive self-talk is a powerful “secret weapon” in training and competition. As with any phase or aspect of enhanced performance, becoming aware of self-talk is the critical first step. By doing so, an athlete understands what kinds of self-talk are effective and can take charge of their self-talk. There are a number of ways to enhance an athlete’s awareness of self-talk.

Retrospection – Taking time to reflect on past performances and the associated feelings and self-talk, especially when the performance was notably above or below average, athletes gain an understanding of how their self-talk affects the performances.

Imagery – Athletes who use imagery or mental rehearsal as part of their training can “re-live” an event to recall their feelings and thoughts.

Self-Talk Log – Some athletes have difficulty with retrospection or imagery and all athletes are susceptible to having memories altered by personal perceptions or forgetting events and thoughts. Keeping a log of self-talk, whether by itself or as part of a more comprehensive

sport log or journal, allows the athlete to record and later review what their thoughts were before, during, and after a performance.

When using any of the above techniques, especially the self-talk log, athletes should address questions such as the following suggested by Dr. Zinsser:

- *When I talk to myself, what do I say?*
- *What thoughts precede and accompany my good performances?*
- *Not only what thoughts, but how frequently am I talking to myself?*
- *When performing poorly, do I deprecate myself?*
- *Do I stay in the present moment, or revert to dwelling on past performance?*
- *Do I call myself names and wish I were sitting on the bench?*
- *Does the content of my self-talk center on how I feel about myself, or how others feel about me, or on not letting down my friends and teammates, or on how unlucky I am?*

Knowledge of one's self-talk allows the athlete to alter their self-talk patterns for future performances. It is vitally important that self-talk in practice and training sessions, indeed at any time, must be positive and set the stage for good performance. One cannot suddenly "turn on" proper self-talk habits that are not used in training.

Controlling and Modifying Self-Talk

Thought Stoppage – If self-talk is so constant as to distract from the performance or if it leads to self-doubt, it must be terminated. Choose a trigger word ("stop") or action (finger snap or light clap of thigh with hand) to use as an aid in breaking the thought pattern and redirecting it to something helpful or to quiet down. Select a memory of a time when negative thought contributed to bad feelings or performance. Vividly recreate the feelings and negative self-talk. Then interrupt and stop those thoughts with the trigger word or action. Practice this and it will become second nature so that it will work in competition.

Changing Negative Thoughts to Positive Thoughts – Stopping negative thoughts can be difficult. Countering them with a positive thought is an effective strategy. When challenged by a new skill or technique, instead of thinking "I'll never learn this new thing coach just showed me." The athlete should replace that thought with "I've learned lots of hard things, so if I work at this one I can learn it as well." Or other positive affirmation. Athletes can make a list of their most common negative thoughts on the left side of a page, and then list a countering positive thought on the right side. Review and revision on a regular basis is a powerful tool for improving the athlete's self-talk. At times, it may also provide them with a bit of humor as they look at some of their old thought patterns!

Countering – Merely changing a thought from negative to positive may not be enough if the athlete still believes the negative thought. Countering is a process of the athlete using facts and reasons to refute their own negative thought. The athlete realizes that the negative thought is a habit and untrue.

Reframing – Often, a negative thought can be turned positive by looking at things from a different frame of reference. Our world is what we make it, so change it! An example might be changing "I'm feeling tense and anxious about the match today." to "I'm feeling excited and ready! I'm more alert and am really on my game today!"

Identifying Irrational and Distorted Thinking – In addition to negative self-talk patterns, athletes often engage in self-talk that is irrational. These irrational thoughts are based on one or more false beliefs:

- I must at all times perform outstandingly well.
- People who are important to me must approve and love me.
- Everyone must treat me kindly and fairly.
- The conditions of my life, especially in sport, must be arranged so that I get what I want when I want.

We wish! If athletes subscribe to any one of these false beliefs, let alone two or more, their progress is blocked.

These false beliefs foster a number of irrational thought patterns, any one of which debilitate an athlete's ability to perform.

- **Perfection is Essential** – This is probably one of the most debilitating thought patterns of all. No one is “perfect” all the time. Strive for perfection. Do not demand it. Coaches need to remember this as well.
- **Catastrophizing** – Perfectionist athletes often feel that the slightest mistake is a catastrophe and humiliation. Failure is not humiliation and is not disappointing parents, friends, and coaches; it is an opportunity to learn. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone. Set realistic performance goals and realize they are not always achieved on the first or 100th try.
- **Worth Depends on Achievement** – Worth as a human being is based on factors other than the win-loss record. This comes as quite a revelation to many young athletes conditioned by a culture of winning is everything.
- **Personalization** – Athletes susceptible to linking self worth to sport achievement often personalize everything. People are not laughing at you and the coach is not upset with you when helping you correct a skill or technique.
- **Fallacy of Fairness and Ideal Conditions** – Life, and sometimes sport, just doesn't seem fair. Some athletes fold up and quit in the face of issues or “bad calls” on the part of the officials. Others shake it off as if it were nothing and go on like it never happened. Problems with the venue? Grumpy officials? Surly opponents? Balky equipment? Get over it. Are you going to let them defeat you or are you going to ignore them and do your best to do what you have trained to do? It takes hard work, including appropriate responses to adversity, to succeed. There is no substitute. The choice is yours.
- **Blaming** – In the face of perceived unfairness or conditions that are less than ideal, it is easy to blame other people or things. How often has a coach heard a new athlete blame the gun for the wild shots? Blaming allows the athlete to abdicate responsibility, which is absolutely nonproductive.
- **Polarized Thinking** – Sport is not made up of absolutes. Athletes are not all “good” or all “bad” nor are their performances. Labeling oneself (“choker”, “loser”) is disabling.
- **One-Trial Generalizations** – Just because something happens once or twice, does not mean it is the general rule. It rarely is the rule! Believing that one or two unsuccessful performances defines the general “rule” blocks future performance. If the “rule” is based on many occurrences, then the repeated shortcoming points the way for special emphasis in training.

Modifying Irrational and Distorted Thinking – Athletes who use any of the above irrational thought patterns need to change the situation. One excellent method is ABC Cognitive Restructuring. Using this method, athletes follow a four step (ABCD) process. It is helpful to set up four columns across a wide sheet of paper to record each step. The explanation and example shown here is adapted directly from the work of Dr. Zinsser. (Zinsser 2006, Figure 17-1) Athletes should follow all four steps for each type of self-talk pattern that they wish to modify.

- **A**ctivating Event – Instructions: Briefly describe the actual event that led to the feelings and behavior. Athlete’s entry: Fouled in final ten seconds of game – missed free throw.
- **B**eliefs or Interpretations – Instructions: Record the actual dysfunctional self-talk and, if appropriate, include mental pictures. Athlete’s entry: I lost the game for the team. (The athlete is using personalization and blaming.) I always choke in pressure situations. (The athlete is using overgeneralization and catastrophizing.)
- **C**onsequences – Instructions: Identify feelings, bodily reactions, and behavior. Athlete’s entry: Depressed, tensed up, blew defensive assignment after free throw.
- **D**ispute or Refutation – Instructions: Write rational response(s) to the automatic thoughts. Athlete’s entry: I am disappointed but that is just one point out of 40 minutes of play. I missed this shot, but there are other times when I have come through under pressure. I will put extra time into free throw practice and work on staying loose and positive.

To aid the process, athletes may stimulate their thinking with the following questions:

- Are the beliefs based on objective reality?
- Are they helpful? Self-destructive thoughts are usually irrational.
- Are they useful in reducing conflicts with others or do they set up a me-versus-them situation?
- Do they help you reach your short and long term goals, or do they get in the way?
- Do they reduce emotional conflict and help you feel the way you want to feel?

Constructing Affirmation Statements – positive, present focused statements of fact or desired behavior are powerful aids. An excellent example is “I play well under pressure.” Note that the following two examples, while seemingly very similar, are ineffective statements: “I want to play well under pressure.” (...but I cannot yet.) or “I always play well under pressure.” (perfectionism). Affirmations are not sufficient by themselves to turn a negatively thinking athlete into one with a more positive mindset. However, as part of a broader program of training, they are quite useful and powerful. Affirmations must be phrased as if the athlete has already achieved the desired state. For example, in 1985 Ivan Lendl had a 9-12 record against John McEnroe. As part of a broader training program, Ivan started writing each day in his notebook, “I look forward to playing John McEnroe.” By 1991 his record was 19-15, including winning the last 10 matches in a row.

Designing Coping and Mastery Self-Talk Tapes – Mental rehearsal or imagery are enhanced through the use of recordings that aid the athlete in mastery of a skill (or their belief in their mastery) or that aid them in handling adversity in a positive manner during performance.

A mastery tape may rehearse a routine, such as a shot process, series of shots, or an entire competition, along with the internal thoughts and feelings of the athlete.

A coping tape may rehearse challenges that the athlete may face, whether they be external or internal. Knowing what to do and how to think, and rehearsing those responses, assures that the correct response will take place in the heat of competition.

One athlete who went on to become an Olympic finalist was prevented from shooting for 3 months due to injury. She rehearsed every day of her recovery. Some days her “match” resulted in Olympic gold and a world record. Other days she rehearsed and imagined everything going wrong: from officiating, to range and weather problems, equipment malfunctions, and even an official stepping on her while about to release a shot. Others laughed when they heard her mention the latter possibility. “Ridiculous!” A few months later, while officiating at a World Cup, I witnessed another official step on her leg while she about to release a shot from the prone position! She shot a quick “look that could kill” at the official - and blithely returned to shooting tens. Her mastery and her coping skills were enhanced by the long layoff due to her constant rehearsal of her mastery and her coping strategies.

Many athletes have not yet developed the vivid mental rehearsal skills of this athlete, and benefit from use of pre-recorded tapes or MP3 files. These may be recorded by others or by the athlete.

Using Videotape and Electronic Trainers to Enhance Performance – Reviewing video of a properly executed skill, whether it be of the athlete them self or of another, allows the athlete to get an external perspective and truly visualize the action. This is also useful to show when an action needs to be modified. Computer-based training devises, such as the Noptel, provide another avenue of “video” review. While working with an athlete to rebuild her confidence prior to the national championships, we identified her belief that her hold on the aiming area was too loose. We could see that her hold was world class, but she didn’t believe it. After watching only three of her shots on the Noptel, she commented: “My hold seems to be pretty good today!” We spent a moment to discuss what she was seeing and how she might respond to what she was observing. After that, her shot release was smooth and decisive, as it had been in prior years. With renewed confidence - and two months of very hard mental, physical, and technical work on her part - she was national champion.

Clearly, these past two articles can only provide an overview of the topics of confidence and self-talk. For more on these topics, and the much broader range of sport psychology, see (Zinsser 2006). The book covers the entire range of sport psychology – that is, the entire range of the elusive concept of “mental training” that is so often talked about and so seldom understood. It provides underlying theory and research findings, as all good texts on the topic do, but does so in a style that is at once rigorous and accessible to the everyday reader. In addition, it provides plenty of examples of the practical application of the techniques. We regularly take concepts directly out of the book and apply them in our training with great success.

References

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